

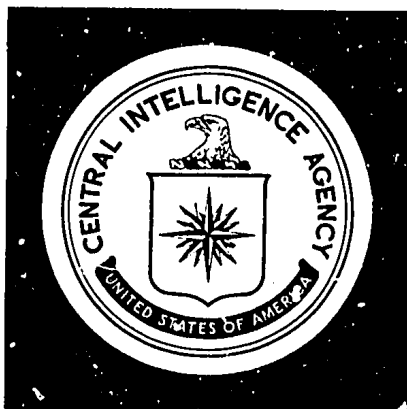
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DIRECTORATE OF
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WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Philippine Student Activists

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PHILIPPINE STUDENT ACTIVISTS





The sudden emergence of a vigorous anti-establishment student movement in 1970 rattled President Marcos' government and frightened some members of the Filipino establishment. In early 1970, large-scale and sometimes violent demonstrations created an atmosphere of urban chaos unlike anything that the country had experienced before. The demonstrations seemed, at the time, to portend the beginning of an era of chronic political instability. The movement raised questions whether the opening of the constitutional convention in mid-1971 would prompt another series of violent anti-Marcos student demonstrations. As it turned out, none took place, and student activism seemed to lose its original, dramatic momentum. In late 1971 and early 1972, student activists tried to mount only a few mass protests or rallies, and attendance at these averaged only a few hundred, as compared with 1970 crowds that had numbered in the thousands. The only sizable demonstration since early 1971—an anti-Vietnam war protest on 20 May 1972—attracted some 2,000 students, far short of the 15,000 the radical leaders had expected. The apathy apparent on campus today represents in

large part a strong reaction against the violence and almost constant disruption of education and campus life caused by earlier activity. The numerous casualties suffered during the demonstrations, combined with a government crackdown on radical students, intimidated many a would-be protester.

For other students, the contradiction between activism and education was an important factor behind their drift away from the movement. A college degree is highly prized in the Philippines, and the average student's presence on campus is, in many cases, the end result of family sacrifice. Thus, many of the students who furnished the manpower for the demonstrations were ready to resume the pursuit of their degree once activism lost its initial excitement. The student movement was also deflated by a strong backlash from the adult population, as evidenced by the decision of many parents to enroll their children at provincial universities rather than at more prestigious institutions in Manila.

Coincident with the anti-activist backlash, the student movement on campus lost much of its left-wing leadership.

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many of the more radical student leaders went underground; others were arrested during the government crackdown in the fall of 1971. This has deprived the campus-based sector of the student movement of much of its direction and sense of purpose.

Because the most active students are engaged in less visible activities in the countryside instead of rioting in the streets of Manila, some observers have concluded that the student movement has lost its force and significance. The tumult and the shouting have faded, but the process of student alienation and radicalization has continued as has a vague commitment to radical social change.

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Origins of the Activist Movement

The rise of political and social consciousness among Filipino students was part of a growing sentiment against the enormous power wielded in the Philippines by a small, corrupt, self-perpetuating oligarchy. A desire for change is being articulated by a post-colonial generation whose view of the importance of the national good is at odds with the value that Filipinos have traditionally placed on personal and familial loyalties and ties. These contradictions—between the old and the new, between the reformers and the oligarchy—will bring tension to the Philippines' political and social life for some time to come.

The loudest voices and most active organizers for reform have come from the liberal wing of the Roman Catholic Church and the university community. They are supported, albeit quietly, by a growing professional and managerial class that has few direct ties to the small group of families which constitutes the backbone of the oligarchy. The students are the most dynamic and radical force for change; they are potentially the most important because of their numbers, their concentration in Manila, and their greater disaffection.

As is true of most developing nations, the Philippines is a youthful country; over two thirds of the population (some 26 million) is under the age of twenty five. About 600,000 are enrolled in institutions of higher education, and half of these attend the 33 colleges and universities in the greater Manila area. With 300,000 students to draw upon, student organizers need attract only a small fraction of the student community into the streets in order to have a mass confrontation.

Numbers alone do not fully explain the students' political potential. Their leading role in the earlier disturbances has given them an awareness of their own importance, and their sub-culture, replete with rock music, marijuana, and radically different hair and dress styles, gives them a sense of identification with one another. The students see themselves engaged in an "us-against-the-establishment" struggle. Not only that, but the mass demonstrations of 1970 and 1971 showed

that, for the first time, the students were not only extending their particular problems to those of society as a whole, but were also ready to demand political change.

The Issues of Activism

Although the students have discovered the magic of politics, their political sophistication is not high. For all of their expressions of dismay with the oligarchy, the students have a faulty appreciation of the ills that beset the country. For example, their complaints about the shortcomings of higher education center on high tuition rates, the "commercialization" of education, poor instruction, and lack of academic freedom. All of these criticisms are valid, but student leaders have failed to zero in on a most significant failing of the Philippine educational system—that it is educating students for unemployment by emphasizing liberal arts programs over more practical training. The students are trained for jobs that do not exist, and the unemployment rate among new graduates is extremely high. For example, six candidates apply for every available teaching position. The government has proposed changes but has run into strong opposition from the students, who continue to equate success with white collar or professional employment. Student activists have denounced the government's



Demonstrations in 1970

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suggested reforms as schemes to undermine student political power.

The students also have too strong a propensity for seeing political problems in terms of personalities. They have come perilously close to identifying President Marcos as the prime cause of the deficiencies of the present political system. By concentrating on the alleged culpability of Marcos, the students in effect have exculpated the oligarchy and the system that is at the root of much of what is wrong with the Philippines. The obsession with Marcos, whose very name has become an epithet on the campus, is a sign of the activists' lack of intellectual depth. It has two consequences. One, it makes the student movement inordinately dependent on the figure of Marcos, and his sudden removal from politics would deprive the movement of its principal impetus. Two, it makes the students vulnerable to manipulation by anti-Marcos politicians, who themselves are part of the ruling oligarchy and have little interest in changing the way the Philippines is governed.

The student position on what ails the Philippines is not always wholly consistent. Although Marcos is seen as the cause of the exploitation of the Filipino people, the students also view him as a tool of "American imperialism." In taking this line, the students are inadvertently revealing their

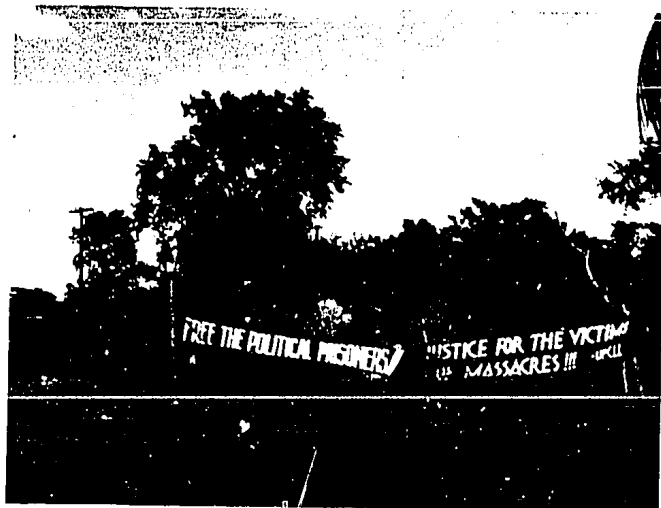
own mental set, i.e., that Filipino politicians and businessmen are not responsible for their own actions and that in an ultimate sense the American military presence and capital investment in the Philippines are responsible for the country's inequities. One might reasonably expect that anti-Americanism would fade into the background as the students began to call attention to corruption and incompetence within the Filipino political system; in fact, denunciation of American "neo-colonialism" has remained a mandatory part of student rhetoric. These regular student denunciations of American "imperialism"—in a nation where four million people recently signed a petition favoring US statehood—provide striking evidence of the cleavages of viewpoint that exist within Filipino society.

More importantly, student preoccupation with American imperialism dilutes the force of their demands for reform. President Marcos and the Filipino establishment are alert to the possibilities of exploiting anti-American feeling among students in order to divert wrath from themselves. The oligarchs reason that, as long as students remain attracted to the foreign devil explanation of Filipino problems, they will not be able to focus their full attention on the establishment itself.

Organizations and Leadership

From the beginning, the student movement has suffered from competition between factions, a lack of recognized leaders, and the difficulty that the highly individualistic Filipinos always have in working with each other. Although the students have similar views about what ails the Philippines, they are far from being united about remedies.

It is difficult to fix the numerous Filipino student organizations along an ideological spectrum. Most politically aware students can be considered radical in the sense that they favor sweeping and fundamental change, but moderate in that few are willing to risk their lives or their futures to bring about the change. The students themselves tend to label as moderate any group falling to the right of the Maoist organizations, thus



Signs on campus, 1972.

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lumping together everyone from the most conservative Roman Catholic group to the student arm of the pro-Soviet Communist Party.

The vast majority of students, of course, are moderates, but their influence is not proportionate to their numbers. The moderate National Union of Students of the Philippines and a number of allied organizations spearheaded student activism in late 1969 and early 1970. They first defined student issues and originated non-violent protest demonstrations. Despite their early ascendancy, however, the moderate student leaders were a small elite with little ability or inclination to build a disciplined mass following. When violence broke out during the large-scale demonstrations of early 1970, the moderate leaders dissociated themselves from confrontation tactics, and the radicals quickly assumed unchallenged leadership of the protest movement.

The moderates stood aside as the radicals took the students into the streets, but by the fall of 1970 large-scale demonstrations waned, and the moderates became active in support of a constitutional convention. With the prospect of writing a new constitution that would be a truly Filipino document and reform the political system, the moderates worked hard to elect sympathetic delegates and involved themselves deeply in the formulation of convention issues and alternatives for constitutional reform. But as it became clear that Marcos and the oligarchy would dominate the convention, students rapidly lost interest in what they had once viewed as the greatest political happening since independence.

[redacted] The moderates, having identified themselves closely with the principle of



After A Kabataang Makabayan "Rally" Near US Embassy, 1972

reform within the system, now risk being discredited by a constitutional convention that shows little promise of fulfilling even modest reformist expectations.

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The Kabataang Makabayan, together with its satellite organizations, is the most energetic and hard-working student group in the Philippines, and the one best able to articulate the mood of Filipino students. Because of its activist program and its flamboyant anti-establishment line, it has had a spontaneous appeal on campus. Most politically active students are inclined to romanticize themselves in the role of committed revolutionaries. Its direct and open link with the Marxist-Leninist party and its military arm, the New People's Army, has undoubtedly helped win it a measure of popular support on campus. Even the moderate students seem to hold a vague empathy for the New People's Army leaders and they grudgingly admire the Kabataang Makabayan for its commitment and its willingness to take daring and dramatic action.

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Student Poster

Despite its success, the Kabataang Makabayan has significant weaknesses. Even more so than its moderate counterparts, it depends on a small corps of leaders. Over the years, they have grown conspiratorial and have begun to hold themselves more and more aloof from the student masses. Various estimates place the organization's membership somewhere between 3,000 and 12,000; it claims 200 chapters scattered through the Philippines. The militant hard core probably numbers no more than a few hundred.

The Kabataang Makabayan's aggressive promotion of violence during demonstrations of 1970 and 1971, its doctrinaire Maoist propaganda and its continual ideological squabbling with the relatively inactive student arm of the pro-Soviet Philippine Communist Party, have undoubtedly cost it many potential members. The Kabataang Makabayan has failed to develop its own mass following and has therefore had to rely on borrowing from the natural constituencies of the

larger moderate organizations. It has been able to attract broad student support only when the issues involved have a general popular appeal, as in the case of recent student demonstrations against the Vietnam war.

Although it has not attracted a mass base of committed followers, it has been the principal beneficiary of the continuing radicalization of Filipino students. The Maoist organizations have been slowly growing despite the relative apathy on the campus. Many moderate activists, who have not yet given up on the system, have drifted away from purely student groups to join the campaigns of other reformist organizations, such as the Federation of Free Farmers. Others are supporting the individual efforts of priest and lay social workers. Students who have become totally alienated from the system are still attracted by the simple, action-oriented solutions of the Kabataang Makabayan and its satellite organizations.

Maoist Strategy and Student Activism

Philippine Maoists at one time saw student activism as the vanguard of the revolution. They thought that a mass student movement, mobilized and directed by them, could paralyze Manila and cause the government to overreact with force, thereby creating a revolutionary situation. The party's emphasis on student activism in the early years was a natural consequence of the fact that the Marxist-Leninist party was created by Maoist student leaders of the Kabataang Makabayan. The Kabataang Makabayan was founded by Jose Maria Sison, a member of the pro-Soviet Communist Party, but in 1969 he broke with the party and formed the Maoist-oriented Marxist-Leninist party.

After forming the new party, Sison's view of the student's role in the revolution began to change. Gradually, he became committed to what he now calls the "proper Maoist strategy" of armed insurrection in the countryside. This change has relegated campus activism to secondary importance. The campus-based Maoists had always propagandized workers, peasants, and other non-student groups. The new emphasis on

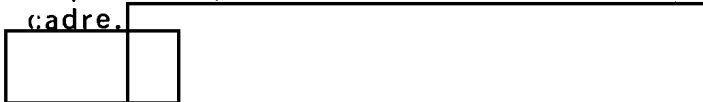
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building a rural Communist movement has directed the main Maoist energies away from the campus and from Manila. Many student cadre now spend their summer vacation in the provinces, often working in conjunction with the party's para-military arm, the New People's Army.

They work actively with the insurgent army's political units in politicizing peasants and otherwise helping pave the way for the army to spread into new areas. Early in 1972, for instance, two of them were killed in a clash with government forces in the Bicol region of southern Luzon. Given the success the New People's Army has had in extending operations into new areas, the Marxist-Leninist party presumably will continue to emphasize rural operations. It has not disowned campus activities, and it will continue to exploit student activism in Manila, but these activities are apparently now subordinate to the primary goal of rural insurrection.

Inevitably, the redirection of priorities weakened the Maoists on campus; in addition, the government's crackdown against prominent student agitators forced top cadre to go underground. The leadership of campus organizations has, therefore, been inherited by second-echelon cadre.



Despite its present difficulties, the Kabataang Makabayan is still a resilient organization, and will probably remain the single most effective entity in the urban student movement. Despite the Maoists' current preoccupation with rural areas, it seems doubtful that they will sacrifice too many of their urban assets. The Maoists consider urban guerrilla war as a part of proper revolutionary strategy. They almost certainly want to maintain a strong nucleus in Manila, both to prepare for the future and to be in a position to take advantage of opportunities that may arise.

Future Directions

Students are away from campus for the April-July summer vacation. Things are likely to

remain reasonably quiet at least until they return, but there are a number of issues that could bring the students back into the streets. The war in Indochina has already precipitated protest rallies during the past week. A scheduled increase in petroleum prices might cause others.

The closing of the constitutional convention in late 1972 or early 1973 will almost certainly stir up the campus if, as expected, it somehow paves the way for Marcos to stay in power. The students are already disillusioned with the convention, and when it is over the moderates may once again be ready to join radicals in mass demonstrations. Anti-Marcos sentiment is the one sure issue on which students can unite. Even if they are handed a provocative issue, however, the student groups still must overcome deficiencies in leadership and organization before they can field a truly effective force for mass action and not just an unruly mob. Moderate student organizations, for example, are so weak that effective direction



Jose Maria Sison

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would either have to come from radical organizers or some non-student source.

One such source could be Senator Jose Diokno, a politician who has demonstrated interest in incorporating students into a wider reformist movement. The senator is a political maverick. He is trying to ingratiate himself with the students and convince them he is a genuine drop-out from the establishment and a sincere reformer who means what he says. Should the constitutional convention arouse great public resentment, it might hand Diokno the extra ingredient he needs for success in this endeavor.

Predicting the future course of student activism is complicated by the movement's vulnerability to outside manipulation—by Communists, by the government, and by the anti-Marcos oligarchs. During the past two years, the government has mounted an energetic propaganda and public relations campaign against the Maoist student organizations. Studies documenting the role of the Marxist-Leninist party within the student movement have been released to the public, and government teams have toured the provinces urging parents and school administrators to take a tough line against radical students. At the same time, the government continues the time-honored Philippine practice of trying to buy off opposition. Marcos in the past has tried to play off one

student group against another, and it seems likely that plenty of money is still being employed to this end.

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Marcos' opponents have also been wooing student radicals.

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Student activism has not developed into the immediate threat to political stability that seemed possible a year ago. The conditions that led to the violence of 1970-71 have not abated, and a sense of urgency infuses those who wish to change the system. Any of several factors could create a situation favorable to a revival of the radical student movement—an arrogant political decision by President Marcos, a marked increase in Communist insurgency, the sudden deterioration of the economy, or a general rise in urban insecurity.

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